

# African Urbanism Colloquium

Cairo, 29-31 May 2010

Hosted by:

Institute for Gender and Women's Studies, The American University



## DRAFT PROGRAMME

### Background

This project seeks to address the continued paucity of theoretical work on the nature and dynamics of urbanism in African cities characterised by large swathes of informality and everyday improvisation. From this vantage point, this project of the ACC brings together a group of (African) urbanists (planners, architects, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers) and conceptual artists (visual and performance) who work on 'everyday urbanism' and related epistemologies as a way of building a new body of theory that can better capture the specificity of urbanism on the Continent. The project commenced in April 2009 with a three-day colloquium in Cape Town and is envisaged to unfold over three years and culminate in a book and special issues of journals. In addition, planning is underway to develop a more explicit cultural/artistic manifestation associated with the project. The project is funded by the African Centre<sup>1</sup> and articulates with related projects they are driving forward.

### Objectives of the project in summary

- Working towards a more precise and compelling understanding of what is actually going on in many African cities since the dominant analytical frameworks remain largely inadequate;
- Exploring a theoretical framework that can more satisfactorily capture the specificities of African urbanisms;
- Forge a conceptual scaffolding for more exploratory research and artistic exploration on contemporary urban dynamics in Africa;
- Intimate an ethical project of thought to define new ways of thinking about alternative futures for African cities;
- Enrich an ongoing global conversation/exploration into alternative theoretical itineraries for accounting for contemporary life in cities of the global South and beyond.

### The Process

An initial exploratory colloquium was convened on the 1-3 April 2009 in Cape Town. This event brought about 34 interested scholars and artists together to meet and engage with each other, and commit to the future steps of the process. The framing paper for this event and the interpretative report are both available at: <http://africancentreforcities.net/programmes/academic-research/african-urbanism-initiative/>

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the various Africa Centre projects, see: <http://www.youtube.com/user/TheAfricaCentre>

The first colloquium was necessarily exploratory and provisional. It also gave the participants an opportunity to explore potential collaborative work across the academic-artistic divide, but not much came of this. The second colloquium is more directed and focussed on surfacing publishable work that can feed into an edited volume (that will be prepared by Edgar Pieterse and AbdouMalik Simone) and special issues of academic journals. In light of this, it was requested that most participants in the Cairo colloquium prepare an abstract and paper for discussion at the colloquium. Artists were encouraged to prepare some reflective statement on their work in addition to some visual demonstration, even though we not did have the resources or capacity to try and exhibit some of the work during the Cairo colloquium.

The informant of the Colloquium remain the framing paper that was tabled at the Cape Town discussion, enriched by the report that was drafted by Karen Press and Christene Hentchel.

### **A further iteration to the conceptual frame for the project and the programme**

We think it is important to provide a relatively broad canvass with 4-5 thematic ideas to anchor the discussion on African urbanism. At the top end of the canvass would be three inter-related clusters:

1. Intensifying slum urbanization in the face of intensified modernisation ambitions across numerous African cities. On the one hand this hints at the ineluctable reality that most large African cities are basically becoming one large slum despite the intense political ambition and investment to make these cities more than just slums. This dilemma of acknowledging slum urbanism on the one hand and also recognising increasingly ambitious efforts to overcome this dynamic seem an important theme to explore.
2. Slum urbanism is closely connected with what one could frame as a question—does the city have a right to be modern; that is, can city administrators, such as in Lagos, Cairo or Nairobi, be heavy handed in remaking the surface of the city so that it is recognized as a viable city and thus able to interact in the financial and political circuits that will bring resources to it? Or is this economic-political governmental project simply a manifestation of knee-jerk neoliberal urban managerialism, or is there something more to it? Moreover, can it be avoided or somehow remade into something with more local resonance?
3. At the intersection of these dynamics—emergent slum spatialities and increasingly bold governmental efforts to forge more modern urbanisms—one can “place” the related dynamics of “culture” and “collective action”. In both realms the terms and scope of the slum urbanism and contemporary modernisation efforts are being contested and recast.
4. At the bottom end of the canvass one can locate the frame of everyday urbanism as explored in the framing paper of last year. Everyday life in its banal mundaneness is understood as always emergent and unfolding along the spectrum of the aesthetic to the functional. With aestheticism we denote the ineluctable demands of beauty, desire and transgression that bubble up from the subconscious to anchor and orient our engagement with the world, cosmologies, the city and its infinite myths, of course always heavily inflected by shape-shifting popular cultures (which in turn is unavoidably infused by consumption). By functionalism we signal pragmatic requirements of dwelling, mobility, sociality and economy that require of all urbanites to incessantly negotiate their livelihood and wellbeing imperatives. Functionalism imperatives in this sense ties back to the broader intentionalities

of the state and elites to fashion African cities in more modern and predictable terms. Both aesthetic desires for belonging and functionalist imperatives of getting-by offer the basis for the enrolment of ordinary people into various state projects of modernisation.

Using these conceptual coordinates as a loose and open-ended frame, we want to choreograph the programme in ways that allow us to deepen each of these themes, allow for maximum input and discussion and avoid a numbing by PowerPoint after PowerPoint in plenary... HOW TO THIS?

It has been impossible to put a programme together because only half of the 34 delegates have submitted either an abstract or paper. We therefore have no idea if everyone is planning to present something or not. It also makes it impossible to do the necessary clustering and cross-fertilisation.

So, for now, here is a general outline of how we would like to organise the time from the 29-31 May in Cairo:<sup>2</sup>

29 May	30 May	31 May
9-10.30: Introductions and framing by Edgar and Maliq, plus general discussion	9.30-11: 3 break-away groups >> 3 participants in each sub-group present their ideas for 20 minutes each followed by synthetic discussion for 45 minutes.	9-11: Feedback from the three groups for plenary engagement and cross-fertilization
10.30: coffee break	11: coffee break	11: coffee break
11-12.45: 3 break-away groups >> 3 participants in each sub-group present their ideas for 20 minutes each followed by synthetic discussion for 45 minutes.	11.30-13.00: 3 break-away groups >> 3 participants in each sub-group present their ideas for 20 minutes each followed by synthetic discussion for 45 minutes.	11.30-13.30: Closing session: next steps and logistics towards publication and other outputs...
12.45-14: Lunch break	13-14.15: Lunch break	13.30 Lunch & departures...
14-15.45: 3 break-away groups >> 3 participants in each sub-group present their ideas for 20 minutes each followed by synthetic discussion for 45 minutes	14.15-16.00: Each group extrapolate key themes and issues for synthetic discussion and presentation during the next morning.	
15.45: coffee break	16.00: coffee and depart for hotel	
16-17: Plenary: Each group feed back 3-4 core ideas that emerged from their discussion during the day...	break	
Travel to hotel and the screening venue...	Informal dinner close to the hotel: 20.00 onwards...	
18.30:-21: Screening of Filip de Boeck's documentary film: Cemetery State		

Note: We are hoping that we can have an informal dinner on the 28 May at one of the open air restaurants close to the hotel. For those who will be around, please gather in the foyer of the hotel from 7.45pm onwards...

Thank you.

<sup>2</sup> A two person film crew will join us during the colloquium to capture as much as possible of the discussions and will ask various delegates for one-on-one interviews at various points during the colloquium.

Attendees List:

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